

CANADA'S NORTH

A LAND ON THE MOVE

BY

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What is the quality about Canada's northern territories - the huge lands that lie north of the ten provinces - that pricks the curiosity and stirs the imagination of so much of the rest of the world?

Only about 40,000 people live there. No more than could be lost in the metropolitan areas of Montreal and Toronto. Or sprinkled out over London or Paris or New York to dissolve among the rooftops.

The north is not the home of the world-famous. For all its exotic image that journalists and television producers from other countries come so far and try so hard to catch in print and on film few northerners are known by name outside Canada. And the names of the few who are may be hard to pronounce. Like Kenojuak, the brilliant young Eskimo artist whose graphic art and sculpture have created for her a reputation far beyond the village of Cape Dorset where she lives.

Is there some spell then about sheer size and remoteness? The north is big, yes. A million and a half square miles in area; one third of the second largest country in the world. (Only Russia is bigger than Canada). But size alone explains nothing in a world generously endowed with big countries. And aircraft has made remoteness, even to the most far-off places, a relative word. From Edmonton, Montreal, Winnipeg and Vancouver the Yukon and the Northwest Territories are only flying hours away. Their capitals, Whitehorse and Yellowknife, are linked to southern Canada by air service that ranges from jets to the two-seaters used by prospectors and geologists. On northern airfields or moored to a lakeside dock, these bright-painted tough little planes look frail as dragon flies.

Anywhere, I love to fly, but especially to fly in the north. By ship is good, too, for then you travel slowly amongst the polar ice. But unless you have all the time in the world (and on working trips who has?) aircraft gets you more quickly into more places. Fixed wing or "chopper" "helicopter) they are all over "le grand nord."

If, on some winter days, when in southern as well as northern Canada planes are grounded and you cannot reach the north, your voice still can. Mass communications - the Northern Service of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, telephone, telex, the bulletins of the arctic weather stations, feed north and south in a continuous two-way exchange. It's a rare home in the north that doesn't have a radio; the voice of the CBC reaches Eskimo and Indian listeners in their own dialects. It is as much a part of the day now as hot coffee to step into any northern home and hear local announcers and disc jockeys livening up the air. Northerners like to talk and on radio everybody has a chance to air their views and hear what the other fellow is saying. If city listeners grow bored with radio, not so the isolated. Voices are a vital human link not only between the north and south but between widely scattered communities throughout the north.

Television will take longer but it's on the way.

Yet for all the great contributions of science and technology the north is still inwardly and outwardly frontier country, full of the style and spirit of a region moving towards the status of a province and impatient to achieve it. A land where weather and distance can be at their most



formidable and the individual, whatever his race, counts heavily. He is himself; not a mere digit of man in the mass. People from other countries must find this frontier quality attractive, too, because so many of them are in the north.

Geography has created no set pattern for the land save its immense size. The territories extend west to east from the borders of Alaska to the rocky east coast of Baffin Island and north from the provincial boundaries to the continental limits of Canada in the high arctic.

Within this rough triangle lies a jig-saw puzzle of mountains and tundra, uncounted lakes and semi-deserts, vast expanses of spongy muskeg, out-croppings of ancient rock. A landscape built from millions of years of geological time that returns man's stare with a cool monolithic gaze that says, "Forever".

The north is many things to many different sorts of men.

To the mining executive it is an area of potential wealth and high cost operations. One of Canada's most respected and successful mining men, a man whose career has included spectacular finds and who is now engaged on a major mining development 300 miles inside the Arctic Circle has said, "In a remote northern location ... the ordinary difficulties are multiplied a thousand times." He was referring here to the whole paraphernalia of development from discovery to markets. Yet all over the north the work gets done. Obstacles are beaten down or bent and twisted into opportunities.

To the scientists working at the government research station at Inuvik in the western arctic the north is a huge outdoor laboratory where life forms range from Nanook, the polar bear, to delicate summer butterflies and ferocious mosquitos. A region where caribou, musk-ox, polar bear and the sea mammals can be studied as they move and drift among the solitudes, driven by urges older than science. Where geologists, geographers, physicists, meteorologists and ice observers probe the secrets of air, land and sea providing basic data for northern development and adding their knowledge to the pool of world science.

But science, vital though it is, is only one segment of a total program. Engineers, town planners, and administrators who, **once their** spending estimates are approved by Parliament must think immediately of getting their programs both onto, and off, the ground, tend to regard life in the north in less esoteric terms. To them and their colleagues, the teachers, doctors, industrial development officers and a complex of connecting professions and jobs, life is a day-to-day succession of frontier rewards and setbacks. Variety and challenge, boredom and isolation, companionship and moments of adventure - northern service has them all.

These are mainly the men and women who come from southern Canada and whose present contribution is vital. But the people who will count most in the long run are the northerners; those who were born in the north or have made in their home; who have roots in the present and a stake in the future. With the movement of the government of the



Northwest Territories into the north, a pioneer step has been taken to bring the Northwest Territories closer to the day when it attains provincial status. The Yukon is likely to achieve this first.

The Northwest Territories adjoins the Yukon along its eastern boundary and is all that its small, compact and homogenous neighbour is not. Unlike the Yukon, which borders on Alaska to the west and is 202,000 square miles in area, the Northwest Territories occupies a million and a quarter miles and is larger than the combined area of six provinces. About 14,700 people live in the Yukon and some 25,000 in the Northwest Territories. All but about 200 of the total Eskimo population of 12,500 live in the Northwest Territories and Arctic Quebec. The northern Indian population of some 4,500 are settled in both Territories in about equal numbers.

In the past dozen years the north has been moving unevenly but strongly out of the frozen channels of isolation into the mainstream of the Canadian future. From the most northerly arctic weather station on Ellesmere Island to the bustling well-settled mining capitals of Whitehorse and Yellowknife it is all very much a part of contemporary Canada.

It is easy to write about the north in segments but hard to describe it whole. It is too massive, too contradictory and there is too much going on. As the Eskimo hunter remarked after inspecting the first plane he had ever seen on the ground, "This is a bad thing to know just a little about." But it draws you back and back to learn more.

The education program is as good an example as any of how solid progress can be so diffused over the huge area it has to cover that it is only when some fairly spectacular stage of progress has been reached that the peaks appear.

Throughout the north children of all races go to school together. And no segment of the government's total northern commitment has been the object of more effort and concern than how to bring education to the children of the north; all the children. And as many adults as wish to have it. Today there are federal schools that range from two-classroom schools in isolated communities where all children but those of the teacher may be Eskimo, to residential and vocational schools in the larger centres where academic studies can take qualified students to university level or offer them a practical trade and commercial training.

Northern children are keen learners and Eskimo children quicker to pick up English than their teachers to learn Eskimo. Strongly creative as a race, Eskimo children delight in the messy joys of finger painting with bright colours on large sheets of brown paper and modelling in clay the birds and animals they watch their fathers and older brothers carve in soapstone. Since radio reception in winter in the more isolated communities is unreliable, teachers rely on taped programs rather than live, and use a great many films, film strips and wall charts.

The test of the program's success lies somewhere within the next ten years. One criterion will be how many qualified young northerners of all races will be occupying positions and holding down jobs now filled



by Canadians from the south. How many Eskimo and Indian teachers will be teaching children of their own race? How many young people will have made a success of the job of their choice if they decide to leave the north and try their luck elsewhere in Canada? And so clear across the north, through almost the whole range of skills and professions. The over-riding question known to every planner, teacher and vocational training expert associated with the program is how many jobs will be waiting for these bright ones when they are ready for them.

If you have seen a group of Eskimo children or teenagers in school you will know with what zest they advance on any opportunity to learn some new thing that interests them. Particularly any skill that can be expressed through their hands - drawing, modelling, painting (or handling a gun). It is not the Eskimo children that teachers have to "sell" on school attendance; it is their parents, some of whom still do not approve of their children being kept at a desk when they could be out with their families hunting or fishing or helping around the house or the boat. The days of the kayak have been succeeded by the power-operated canoe and the Peterhead, both can move fast to the seal and walrus hunting grounds and hunting is a family affair.

Many who may know little else about Canada have heard of Eskimo art. By now the sculpture, prints and fine crafts have been shown in many world capitals where they have had a great success. Those who regret the passing of "primitive" carving should remember that a vital art does not live in the past, nor do artists with something to say.

Those who own the art quite often remark on the Eskimos' gift for conveying so much in deceptively simple lines. They ask - how do the artists achieve this feeling of strength? Do they drive themselves hard? Do they ever seem unsure of what the end result will be? How do they work?

Most Eskimos seem to work in a concentrated way, yes. Yet giving a feeling of being relaxed about it, too. I mean they give a sense of enjoying what they are doing and not being anxious about it though like all artists, they must have their anxieties. Will this crude, dusty lump of soapstone turn into the shapes they wish it to? Will the colours of a drawing, the texture of a print, turn out right?

Perhaps they ask themselves these questions. But the feeling I get about them when they work is quietness, an easy, concentrated strength. At Cape Dorset and other talented communities such as Povungnituk, Holman, too. But they don't get excited about it.

I remember noticing this quality of quiet collectedness in Kananginak, one of Dorset's best hunters and an excellent artist, when he came south to the opening of a new collection at which his own and his wife's work were represented. He received a good deal of publicity but remained quite unruffled by it. At one stage, when the opening was over and a cocktail party in full swing, shrill and noisy, I asked Kananginak if the noise bothered him. The interpreter said something and they both laughed, then the interpreter replied, "Kananginak says the noise does not bother him at all. It just reminds him of standing below a cliff of gulls when someone is raiding the nests."



Everything about the arctic landscape, every changing season, every creature that walks or swims or flies is part of the Eskimo's life and therefore of his art. So is that other landscape where the spirits dwell.

A Canadian poet has written of the arctic

"a land where all is space  
and nothing time  
where today was tomorrow  
and tomorrow will be yesterday."

And when you turn off your radio and step out of your warm house and walk alone on the tundra you find that this is how the land still is.

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